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A case study of career related challenges of expatriate Indian professionals in the GCC countries.

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Abstract

The success of an overseas employment contract is significantly influenced by career related challenges. This paper presents the findings of a primary research conducted in the three GCC countries (Bahrain, Oman and the UAE) to comprehend the key career related challenges faced by professional Indian expatriates. This paper also explores the influence of demographic factors on career related challenges and concludes with the analysis of overall findings.

1. Introduction

Workers who engage in short-term or medium-term overseas employment are classified as expatriates (Andreason, 2003). Expatriate assignments in general suffer from certain intrinsic drawbacks. Literature review (Minter 2008; Koteswari and Bhattacharya 2007; Shaffer et al. 2001) highlighted the following frequently quoted career associated challenges:

- lack of ample time for career planning,
- slow pace of professional progress during the course of expatriate assignment,
- loss of career direction,
- loss of value of present work in the parent country,
- acquisition of skills which might be non-transferable to future work in the parent country,
- non-acquisition of new skills being developed in the parent country,
- lack of organizational support in acquiring professional skills,
- spill over of stress in personal life due to career related matters.

Individual demographic aspects such as age, gender, ethnic background, tenure of the overseas employment significantly affect the success of overseas employment contract (Naithani and Jha 2009; Mamman, 1995). According to Caligiuri and Lazarova (2005) individual factors play a significant role in the success of an overseas assignment.

2. Defining the scope of research and research methodology

In view of the above findings, the three following research questions were developed to understand the career related challenges faced by professional expatriates.

Research question 1: Does your job allow you ample time for your career planning?

Research question 2: Does your organization support you in acquiring professional skills?

Research question 3: Do you think your career related matters don't contribute to stress while you are at home?

Considering the literature review following demographic factors were selected for the study: Gender, age, expatriate experience, marital status, working spouse, number of children, days worked and hours worked. Target population to be studied was expatriate Indian professionals. Within the target population a specific subset of higher education teachers was selected. Out of the six GCC countries three countries (Bahrain, Oman and UAE) were selected for the research. Data were collected through a survey. As the target population was spread across three different countries, data were collected through self-administered web-based questionnaire. The sample size was 271 (at a 5 percent margin of error and 90 percent confidence level) and the net response rate was 141 (52 percent).

3. Findings and discussion

Individual analysis of the three questions asked in the career and personal growth category of the questionnaire is presented in the following section of this chapter.

1. Does your job allow you ample time for your career planning?

Except for age and family size (number of children of married respondents) all other factors significantly influenced responses to the question. Summary of the hypothesis tests is presented in the following table (Table 1). The majority (61 percent) of the respondents moderately (43 percent) or strongly (18 percent) disagreed that their job provided them with ample time for career planning (Table 2). Responses from male and female respondents had significant difference with p (2 tailed) = 0.002 ($p < 0.05$). Median of 2 for female respondents indicated a higher degree of disagreement when compared to male responses who reported median of 3.

| Factor | Significance | Test Result |
|------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|
| Gender | $p = 0.002, p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |
| Age | $p = 0.069, p > 0.05$ | Do not reject H_0 |
| Expat experience | $p = 0.001, p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |
| Marital Status | $p = 0.003, p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |
| Working spouse | $p = 0.003, p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |
| No of children | $p = 0.440, p > 0.05$ | Do not reject H_0 |
| Days worked | $p = 0.012, p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |
| Hours worked | $p = 0.001, p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |

Table 1: Significant differences in responses to question one

Three out of every four female respondents (76 percent) reported squeeze of time for career planning in the workplace, whereas relatively lower (two out of every four) number of males felt the same (Table 2). The level of disagreement with time available for career planning in the workplace was very high (strongly disagreed) for one in every four female respondents (25 percent) whereas for males it was relatively lower at one in every eight male respondents (12 percent). Thus a higher number of female respondents reported a higher degree of disagreement for time available for career planning in the workplace.

| | S. Agree | M. Agree | Neutral | M. Disagree | S. Disagree | N | n* |
|--------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|-------------|-----|-----|
| Total | 3 (2%) | 36 (26%) | 15 (11%) | 61 (43%) | 26 (18%) | 141 | Nil |
| Male | 3 (4%) | 27 (36%) | 8 (11%) | 27 (36%) | 9 (12%) | 74 | Nil |
| Female | ----- | 9 (13%) | 7 (10%) | 34 (51%) | 17 (25%) | 67 | Nil |

n: total responses; n*: no response

Table 2: Response frequency details for question one

Respondents with one to two years of expatriate work experience reported a higher degree of disagreement ($n=21$, median=1) whereas respondents with over two years of expatriate work experience reported relatively moderate disagreement ($n=103$, median=2). Unmarried respondents were relatively more satisfied with the time available at workplaces for career planning ($n=8$, median=4) in comparison to married respondents ($n=131$, median=2). Married male respondents ($n=107$, median=2) with a working wife reported higher disagreement, while married men ($n=20$, median=3.5) with a homemaker wife reported relatively a higher degree of agreement. Respondents working less than 40 hours in a week reported moderate agreement ($n=22$, median=4) whereas respondents working more than 52 hours a week reported strong disagreement ($n=2$, median=1.5). Older respondents (55 years and above) reported a relatively higher degree of agreement (median=3.5). Whereas for all the other respondents between the age ranges of 25 to 54 years the degree of agreement was lower (median=2). As the number of older respondents was low ($n=6$) in comparison to other age groups ($n=134$), the statistical difference in responses to question one from respondents of different age group was not significant ($p=0.069$, $p>0.05$).

As per the above discussion following is the final status of demographic factors which significantly influenced responses to the question which inquired about availability of ample time for career planning at the workplace.

- The majority of the respondents disagreed with the statement that their job provided them with ample time for career planning.
- Degree of disagreement was higher for female respondents.
- With the decreasing number of years of expatriate experience the degree of disagreement increased.
- Married respondents, in comparison to single (unmarried) respondents reported a higher degree of disagreement.
- Male respondents with a working spouse reported a higher degree of disagreement in comparison to married male respondents with homemaker wife.
- With increasing number of working hours the degree of disagreement increased.

2. Does your organization support you in acquiring professional skills?

Except for age, family size (number of children of married respondents) and number of days worked in a week, all other factors significantly influenced responses to the question which inquired about organizational support for acquiring professional skills (Table 3).

| Factor | Significance | Hypothesis Test Result |
|------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Gender | $p = 0.001$, $p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |
| Age | $p = 0.110$, $p > 0.05$ | Do not reject H_0 |
| Expat experience | $p = 0.001$, $p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |
| Marital Status | $p = 0.002$, $p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |
| Working spouse | $p = 0.0075$, $p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |
| No of children | $p = 0.758$, $p > 0.05$ | Do not reject H_0 |
| Days worked | $p = 0.151$, $p > 0.05$ | Do not reject H_0 |
| Hours worked | $p = 0.002$, $p < 0.05$ | Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 |

Table 3: Significant difference in responses to question two

Seven out of 10 respondents reported moderate disagreement (48 percent) or strong disagreement (23 percent) with the statement that their organization supported them in acquiring professional skills (Table 4). Only two out of ten respondents strongly (4 percent) or moderately (16 percent) agreed with the statement.

| | S. Agree | M. Agree | Neutral | M. Disagree | S. Disagree | n | n* |
|--------|----------|----------|----------|-------------|-------------|-----|-----|
| Total | 5 (4%) | 23 (16%) | 14 (10%) | 67 (48%) | 32 (23%) | 141 | Nil |
| Male | 4 (5%) | 21 (28%) | 8 (11%) | 32 (43%) | 9 (12%) | 74 | Nil |
| Female | 1 (1%) | 2 (3%) | 6 (9%) | 35 (52%) | 23 (34%) | 67 | Nil |

n: total responses; n*: no response

Table 4: Response frequency details for question two

Men reported a higher degree of agreement with organizational support. One out of every three men reported either strong (5 percent) or moderate (28 percent) agreement, whereas only one out of every twenty five women reported strong or moderate agreement (Table 5.16). Eighty five percent women either moderately or strongly disagreed with the statement and the relatively lower percentage of men (55 percent) disagreed with the statement. Thus women respondents seem to be relatively more negatively influenced by the lack of organizational support in their career related matters.

Respondents with lesser years (one to two years) of expatriate experience (n=21, median=1) reported a significantly higher disagreement when compared to respondents with two or more years of expatriate experience (n=103, median=2). Out of 134 respondents 70 respondents (52 percent) who had lived for more than five years in the GCC countries, reported moderate disagreement (median=2). This indicates that though a high number of respondents were not satisfied with the organizational support for their career growth, yet they continued their expatriate assignment for a longer period.

Single respondents (all male) reported a higher degree of agreement 4 with the organizational support (n=8, median=4) in comparison to married respondents (n=131, median=2). Within the category of married men, significant difference was observed 4 in responses from married men with working wives and married men with homemaker wives ($p=0.0075$, $p<0.05$). Respondents working less than 40 hours per week 4 reported moderate agreement (n=22, median=4), respondents working between 40 to 52 hours reported relatively moderate degree of disagreement (n=105, median=2) and the respondents working more than 52 hours reported the highest degree of disagreement (n=2, median=1.5).

As per above discussion following is the final status of demographic factors which significantly influenced responses to the question which inquired about organizational support in acquiring professional skills.

- The majority of the respondents disagreed with the statement that their organization provided support for acquiring professional skills.
- Female respondents reported a higher degree of disagreement.
- With the decreasing number of years of expatriate experience the degree of disagreement increased.
- Married respondents reported a higher degree of disagreement when compared to single (unmarried) respondents.
- With the increasing number of weekly working hours the degree of disagreement increased.

3. Do you agree that your career related matters donot contribute to stress while you are at home?

Gender and years of expatriate experience significantly influenced responses to the question which inquired about spill-over of workplace stress to the home (Table 5).

| Factor | Significance | Hypothesis Test Result |
|------------------|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| Gender | p= 0.0043, p<0.05 | Reject H_o in favour of H_1 |
| Age | p= 0.378, p>0.05 | Do not reject H_o |
| Expat experience | p= 0.049, p<0.05 | Reject H_o in favour of H_1 |
| Marital Status | p= 0.190, p>0.05 | Do not reject H_o |
| Working spouse | p= 0.0902, p>0.05 | Do not reject H_o |
| No of children | p= 0.327, p>0.05 | Do not reject H_o |
| Days worked | p= 0.635, p>0.05 | Do not reject H_o |
| Hours worked | p= 0.423, p>0.05 | Do not reject H_o |

Table 5: Significant difference in responses to question three

Four out of every five (79 percent) respondents moderately (53 percent) or strongly (26 percent) disagreed with the question. Only one out of ten (11 percent) respondents strongly (2 percent) or moderately (9 percent) agreed with the question (Table 6).

| | S. Agree | M. Agree | Neutral | M. Disagree | S. Disagree | n | n* |
|--------|----------|----------|---------|-------------|-------------|-----|----|
| Total | 3 (2%) | 12 (9%) | 12 (9%) | 70 (53%) | 34 (26%) | 131 | 10 |
| Male | 3 (4%) | 10 (15%) | 6 (9%) | 37 (55%) | 11 (16%) | 67 | 7 |
| Female | ----- | 2 (3%) | 6 (9%) | 33 (52%) | 23 (36%) | 64 | 3 |

n: total responses; n*: no response

Table 6: Response frequency details for question three

Frequency and degree of disagreement were significantly higher with the female respondents (Table 6). In comparison to 71 percent males (55 percent moderately disagreed and 16 percent strongly disagreed) 88 percent females (52 percent moderately disagreed and 36 percent strongly disagreed) reported disagreement. One out of five male respondents (19 percent) reported moderate (15 percent) or strong (4 percent) agreement with the statement, whereas only 3 percent women moderately agreed and none strongly agreed. Respondents with 1 to 2 years of expatriate experience reported a higher degree of disagreement (n=20, median=1) in comparison to respondents with over 2 years of expatriate experience (n=94, median=2). But long years (over two years) of expatriate experience did not report any significant difference in degree of disagreement. Respondents in the response categories of 2-5 years (n=28, median=2), 5-10 years (n=49, median=2) and over 10 years (n=17, median=2), reported similarity in degree of disagreement.

As per above discussion following is the final status of demographic factors which significantly influenced responses to the question (Q3) inquiring about spill-over of career related stress to personal life at home.

- The majority of the respondents disagreed with the statement that career related stress did not spill-over to their personal life at home.
- Higher degree of disagreement was reported by female respondents.
- With the decreasing number of years of expatriate experience the degree of disagreement increased.

4. Conclusion

The following table (Table 7) presents a consolidated view of tests for significant differences in responses to career and personal growth.

| Segment ► | Career & personal growth | | |
|------------------|---------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------|
| | Q1 | Q2 | Q3 |
| Demography ▼ | Time for career planning at workplace | Organisational support | Work-to-home spillover of stress |
| Gender | Yes* | Yes* | Yes* |
| Age | No ⁺ | No ⁺ | No ⁺ |
| Expat experience | Yes* | Yes* | Yes* |
| Marital Status | Yes* | Yes* | No ⁺ |
| No of children | No ⁺ | No ⁺ | No ⁺ |
| Working spouse | Yes* | Yes* | No ⁺ |
| Days worked | Yes* | No ⁺ | No ⁺ |
| Hours worked | Yes* | Yes* | No ⁺ |

* Reject H_0 in favour of H_1 ; ⁺ Do not reject H_0

Table 7: Compilation of tests for significant differences in responses (career and personal growth) on the basis of nine demographic factors

Gender and years of expatriate experience were identified as the most important demographic factors which significantly influenced career and personal growth factors of expatriate Indian professionals (higher education teachers). Female respondents reported a significantly higher degree of disagreement with career and personal growth issues. Respondents with a higher number of expatriate work experience reported a higher degree of agreement. Question on spill-over of stress from work to home was the least influenced by demographic factors. Gender and years of expatriate experience significantly influenced the work to home spill-over of stress (Table 7). Findings from the above analysis (career and personal growth segment) are in line with another global survey of expatriates (ORC 2006) which reported only 16 percent of employers providing formal career planning or management support to its expatriate employees.

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